Poliospiza burtoni burtoni (Gray), 5,500 ft. Boulton and Rand (1952), 4500 ft.

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On the taxonomy of *Athene noctua* in Israel

by James M. Harrison and Haim Hovel

Received 8th January, 1964

The taxonomic position of *Athene noctua* (Scopoli) in Israel is by no means simple. Adding to the difficulties is the fact that the species is extremely variable; this variability is at times apparent even in the field and Dr. Mendelssohn informs us (*in litt.* 12.11.63) that he saw a pair during the late winter, sitting close together on a telephone wire near Tel Aviv, one looking very light, the other quite dark.

Israel by virtue of its geographical situation would undoubtedly favour an exchange of genes with certain contiguous races. The principal of these being the Balkan form *Athene noctua indigena* C. L. Brehm to the north, as well as to the west on those eastern Mediterranean islands lying just off shore, while to the south in the delta of the Nile a probable influence by the resident form there *A. n. glaux* (Savigny) has to be recognised. Again on the Arabian peninsula the widely distributed *A. n. saharae* (Kleinschmidt) most certainly infiltrates into the desert country of the southern half of Israel, and there is also evidence that this form has extended northwards along the shores of the Dead Sea and into the northern Ghor where specimens have been collected in the Jericho district of the Wadi Kelt.

The taxonomic position as set out by Dementiev (*et al.*, 1951) and Meinertzhagen (1954) needs to be re-examined in the light of the above

considerations. Peters (1940)* accepted the form *A. n. lilith* Hartert tentatively though this race is regarded as a synonym of *A. n. saharae* by both Dementiev (*loc. cit.*) and Meinertzhagen (*loc. cit.*). It should, however, be noted that many of the birds examined in the British Museum series by one of us (J. M. H.) from the southern half of the Arabian peninsula were

conspicuously paler than topotypical *A. n. saharae*. We would stress the desirability of re-examining *A. n. lilith* on a more extensive material and would meanwhile support the tentative opinion of Peters (*loc. cit.*) in recognising the validity of Hartert's race. No doubt this form, as is true of all forms of this species, will be found subject to considerable individual variation as well as to the effects of secondary intergradation with neighbouring races.

While the series from Israel upon which this communication is based is admittedly not extensive, it is, nevertheless, our considered opinion that it demonstrates clearly that the taxonomic position of the species is not as simple as has been implied by the authorities cited, and that there is in effect considerable evidence of a gene-flow between the forms mentioned.

This is more in evidence in the northern half of the country where there is, without any question, considerable intergradation of the resident population with *A. n. indigena*. Our rather limited material also suggests strongly that the population in the desert country of the southern half of Israel tends to be phenotypically far more constant. This constancy would seem to be preserved also in the birds of the depression of the Dead Sea, an area which is, after all, to be regarded as a continuation of the great rift valley in character typical of arid rocky desert.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The populations of *Athene noctua* in Israel would seem to present certain significant morphological differences, which cannot be entirely satisfactorily explained as due to individual variation only.

The wide differences of habitat from the fertile agricultural country of the northern half, in marked contrast to the arid desert country of the south, and of the Dead Sea depression, would doubtless account for the greater morphological constancy of the populations in these regions of Israel where the effects of secondary intergradation are less apparent than in the north.

A most interesting and extremely pale population is to be found in the Ghor country east of Jericho: the birds here are paler than topotypical *saharae* and can only be matched in this respect by individuals from the central and southern areas of Arabia. They are in no way typical of the majority of individuals from Israel. Hartert (1912–21) gave as the distribution of the race *A. n. lilith*, Palestine (which at that time included the Wadi Kelt, now in Jordan), Mesopotamia (upper Euphrates) and south-west Persia. Hartert (1925) comments "Col. Meinertzhagen, *Ibis*, 1924, p. 618, says that *lilith* and *saharae* are the same, in which case, however, he should have called all the desert birds *saharae*, not *lilith*, the former name having been published 1909, *i.e.* four years before *lilith*.

Spreading our 29 *saharae* side by side with 15 *lilith*, it is obvious that the latter average much paler, especially the heads being lighter; only 3 of our 15 could be mistaken for *saharae*, while only 2 of our *saharae* would be called *lilith* if their origin was unknown. Possibly, if I had had all this material available in 1913, I would not have named *lilith*, but it seems wiser not to unite it with *saharae*". It is our opinion that the validity of this race deserves re-assessment.

Our determination of the 21 specimens is as under:—

No.	*Coll.*	*Locality*	*Date*	*Designation*
1.	H.H. 29	Athlit	19.1.52	*A.n. glaux*
2.	H.H. 62147	Haifa	7.5.62	*A.n. indigena* ≳ *glaux*
3.	H.H. 59203	Bet Oren	9.10.59	*A.n. indigena* ≳ *glaux*
4.	H.H. 62144	Bet Govrin	5.5.62	*A.n. glaux* ≳ *saharae*
5.	H.H. 614	Bersheba	15.4.57	*A.n. saharae*
6.	H.H. 59085	Bersheba	23.4.59	*A.n. saharae*
7.	J.M.H.IL. 19	Mt. Carmel	5.10.59	*A.n. indigena*
8.	J.M.H.IL. 37	Nahal Oren	8.10.59	*A.n. indigena* ≳ *glaux*

No.	*Coll.*	*Locality*	*Date*	*Designation*
9.	J.M.H. (H.H. 205)	Huleh	9.10.54	*A.n. indigena* ≷ *glaux*
10.	J.M.H.IL. 61	Haifa	11.4.61	*A.n. indigena* ≷ *glaux*
11.	J.M.H.IL. 62.33	Bersheba	27.4.62	*A.n. saharae*
12.	J.M.H. (H.H. 401)	Nevatim	24.3.56	*A.n. saharae*
13.	AV. 18L. Tel-Aviv Univ.	Wadi Kelt	15.11.44	*A.n. saharae* though paler than *saharae*
14.	AV. 3399 Tel-Aviv Univ.	Bet-Lid	28.5.57	*A.n. indigena* ≷ *glaux*
15.	AV. 3539 Tel-Aviv Univ.	Dorot	22.2.59	*A.n. glaux* ≷ *saharae*
16.	H.H. 62167	Bersheba	8.6.62	*A.n. saharae*
17.	H.H. 63172	Ofaqim	8.6.63	*A.n. glaux* ≷ *saharae*
18.	AV. 794 Tel-Aviv Univ.	Wadi Raman	–.4.52	*A.n. saharae*
19.	BM. No. 1946.63.7	Jericho	8.11.44	*A.n. glaux* ≷ *saharae*
20.	BM. No. 1946.3.5	Wadi Kelt	5.11.44	*A.n. saharae* though paler than *saharae*
21.	BM. No. 1925.6.14.1	Nazareth	19.7.21	*A.n. glaux* ≷ *saharae*

Acknowledgements:

Our thanks are due to Professor H. Mendelssohn of the Tel Aviv University for the loan of material, and for his kind interest, also to Mr. J. D. Macdonald, Director of the Bird Room, British Museum (Natural History), London, for providing us with facilities to study the series in the collection there.

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On birds new for New Guinea or with a larger range than previously known

by A. HOOGERWERF

(*continued from page 77 — April 1964*)

12 *Aquila audax* (Latham) Wedge-tailed Eagle

It seems logical that the very small range as indicated by Mayr "south New Guinea, between the Oriomo River and Gaima, mouth of Fly River" is too restricted for such a large bird of prey. In any case I have found this eagle of fairly regular appearance in the part of New Guinea with which I am most familiar.

We not only observed it at Kurik and surroundings, inclusive of the ricefields, but also at the Paal Putih area along the mouth of the Maro River opposite Merauke.

On 13th December, 1960 I saw a young one hardly able to fly consuming a flying fox (fruit bat) when sitting on a high tree just east of the South polder. Both adults were in the same tree and this observation makes it almost certain that the Wedge-tailed Eagle may be breeding there.

* Peters stated "*A. n. lilith* is somewhat intermediate between *saharae* and *bactriana*, sometimes placed in the synonymy of one, sometimes of the other; perhaps best recognised tentatively." *Cf.* also Hartert, Nov. Zool. 32, 1925.